

The Happiest Christmas

by kaly

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The Happiest Christmas

Title: The Happiest Christmas Author and Email: Kalynn

kalynn95@juno.com Homepage:

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Author's Notes: Well, tonight I was finally writing the XFiles story I had been meaning to work on for days and what happened? A new Profiler story idea popped into my head. So, here's my holiday story, hope you like it. It's different, let's say *g* Merry Christmas!!! Please send me your thoughts on the story! :-) Thanks! ~Kaly

The Happiest Christmas

Leaving the quickly emptying mall, Sam jostled her packages and bags in her arms. Digging in her coat pocket, she finally managed to find her keys as she approached her car. Unlocking the trunk, she piled the last minute gifts inside and turned to get in her car when she noticed a little boy standing not far away.

Glancing around, she couldn't see anyone else in the parking lot and walked over to the boy. "Are you lost?" she asked, kneeling down beside him.

He started to shake his head, but nodded instead. Sam smiled, "Who were you here with? Your mommy or your daddy?" When he didn't answer,

she tried again. "Where was the last place you saw your parents?"

When he shrugged his shoulders, but didn't speak she stood and looked around again. "Let's go to the mall office, okay?"

He hesitantly took her offered hand and they walked back across the parking lot. However, when they reached the doors it was to discover that they were locked. Glancing at her watch, Sam noted that the mall had closed early for the holiday.

She looked back at the shivering little boy, standing there in a hooded sweat shirt and jeans, with no coat, and knew she couldn't leave him there. Waging a mental battle, she knew she should call the police right away, but there wasn't a phone nearby and her cell phone was at home.

Making a decision, and before she could change her mind, she kneeled down in front of him again. "How about we go to my house and we work on finding your parents, okay?"

He nodded, but still didn't speak, only looking sadly at the ground.

After they had gotten in the car, she looked at him in the brighter interior light before she shut her door. He had dark wavy hair and striking blue eyes, Sam couldn't help but think that he would be a heartbreaker when he grew up.

As she drove, she was making a mental list of things she would have to do when they reached the house. First she would try and find George, and if all else failed contact Atlanta PD. Looking over at the little boy, she realized that she had never thought to ask his name.

"So," she asked, not taking her eyes off the road, "what's your name? Mine's Samantha."

Big blue eyes looked up at her when she glanced over at the passenger seat. "Johnny O'Doyle. But I like John better," he almost whispered, proud of his grown up name in the way only a six year old can be.

Sam blinked, fighting the urge to turn and stare at him. she thought to herself. Managing to control her surprise, she asked, "How old are you, John?"

"Six," a very small voice confirmed her guess.

Hoping to keep him talking, she asked him, "How did you end up all alone in the parking lot?"

He sighed, trying to decide if he should tell the stranger the whole story. "My dad took me shopping. First time that I can remember that we went out together, usually one of his buddies is there. I wanted to get my mommy something for Christmas." He paused, sniffing softly. "I broke something in one of the stores and he started yelling at me. I ran away, and then when I tried to find him, I . . . I couldn't find him anywhere."

"Do you know your phone number, John?"

In response, he only shook his head no.

"I'll get you home for Christmas, okay? I promise." Again, big blue eyes that seemed to stare right into her looked up, and he nodded his head slowly.

The rest of the drive, John didn't say anything else. Sam, for her part, couldn't stop thinking. The resemblance between the little boy beside her and the man she had grown to know was astounding, right down to the name. Pulling up outside the house she shared with Chloe, she killed the car and got out.

After he too got out of the car, John walked around to the back. "Want any help?" Sam couldn't believe the maturity that seemed to exist around the soft-spoken little boy.

"No thanks," she smiled as she spoke. "I can get it." Picking up the various sacks and packages, she closed the trunk and they walked around to the front door. After she unlocked the door, she called out, "Chloe? Amy? I'm home!"

By the time she placed the packages on the couch, she heard the sound of feet on the stairs. "Hey Mom!" Chloe called.

"Hi, Dr. Waters," Amy added.

Pulling off her gloves, Sam guided John from the foyer to the living room. "Chloe, Amy, this is John. John, this is my daughter Chloe and her babysitter, Amy."

John glanced at the two girls standing there, and went back to staring at the floor. Chloe looked at John and then up at her mom. "Mom?"

"I'll explain later," Sam answered. "Why don't you go and show John the Christmas tree?"

Chloe nodded eagerly, raced up and quickly grabbed John's hand. "Come on, it's great this year. A real live tree and everything!"

Sam smiled, watching the two children race for the living room. "Thanks for staying, Amy. I know it's Christmas Eve."

Smiling, Amy replied, "No problem, Dr. Waters. Glad to help, but I better get home before it gets any later."

"Do you need a ride?" Sam asked as the sound of Chloe's cheerful laughter, joined by John's more hesitant laughter, echoed in from the living room.

Grinning, Amy said, "Ah, no thanks, it's not that far. And from the sound of that, you might have your hands full here. Good night! Merry Christmas!" She added the last after she pulled on her coat and was walking out the door.

"Merry Christmas, Amy," Sam said, pushing the door closed.

Pulling off her coat and hanging it on the coat rack, Sam turned and

walked into the living room. For the first time that night she saw a smile on John's face. "Hey, Chlo, why don't you put those new presents under the tree while I make some hot chocolate?"

Her eyes bright, Chloe practically bounced over to the table. "Okay! Anything for me?" she asked eagerly, looking at the various name tags. Quickly, she handed one over to John, "Here, you can put this one under the tree!"

Sam laughed, and walked into the kitchen. After she put a pot of water on the stove, she picked up the telephone and dialed George's number. Several rings later, there was no answer and she disconnected the line. Sighing, she dialed the number for the police station.

She was almost finished with the cocoa when she finally had an answer to her question. No child matching John's description or name had been reported missing. Unable to think of sending him off to the police station on Christmas Eve, she left her name and number and hung up the phone.

"So, who wants hot chocolate?" Sam asked, walking back into the living room.

"I do! I do!" Chloe called out, racing over to her mom. "Want me to give John one?"

Sam nodded, and handed Chloe two mugs. "Be careful, it's hot."

"We will!" Chloe said.

A few minutes later, John went to set his mug down on the table, but it slipped and fell on the floor, breaking. Sam jumped up to find a towel to clean up the mess, but froze when John flinched. "I . . . I'm sorry," he stammered, his eyes wide and brimmed with tears.

Dropping down on her knees beside him, she pulled him into a hug. "It's okay. I was just going to get something to clean it with. No big loss, those mugs are ancient." She pulled back to look at him, and wiped a large tear from his cheek.

"Okay?" He sniffed, but nodded. "Good. Why don't you and Chloe go and play in the play room. Would you like that?"

He nodded, "Yes, ma'am." Chloe watched the exchange curious, confused at exactly what had happened, but stayed quiet.

Sam smiled, "Chloe, the two of you go and play while I clean this up, okay? Then we'll watch the Grinch," she added with a grin.

Both young faces in front of her perked up at the mention of the Grinch. "Cool!" Chloe said, taking John's hand and leading him from the room. Sam heard Chloe talking to John as they walked away, "You'll love my play room. There's lots of cool stuff."

Going into the kitchen, Sam found the carpet cleaner and a towel and went back into the living room. While she worked on cleaning the cocoa, her mind was running a mile a minute. She couldn't believe how quiet and reserved John was. Most six year olds were hyper and loud.

John was turning out to be the exact opposite.

Sam cut off the thought. the John I know> she told herself. She still couldn't believe he had flinched after dropping the mug. she wondered.

The sound of laughter echoed down the hall and broke Sam out of her thoughts. She smiled, thinking that playing would draw him out of his shell a bit. She had never thought about what a handful two little ones could be, but knew she wouldn't change anything. Especially if it meant hearing that little boy laugh.

Sam let them play for a while before knocking on the doorframe of the play room. "Okay, you two," she said with a glint in her eye. "Movie time, popcorn's ready."

John's eyes showed his surprise, and Sam asked, "Do you not have popcorn with your movies?"

"My mom let's me, but only when my dad doesn't find out."

Sam nodded, smiling, "Well, it's tradition here. So, come on you two."

She was finding it hard to believe that the little boy that emerged from the play room was the same one that she had seen earlier. His eyes were alive, and he laughed with delight at the movie. Sam smiled softly, seeing the transformation before her eyes.

When the movie ended, Chloe looked over at her mom from where she and John were laying in the floor. "Can we open a present now? It's Christmas Eve!"

Sam grinned, "Well, seeing as how we open gift each year on Christmas Eve, I suppose we should. Go ahead, pick one Chlo." Seeing the fallen look on John's face as Chloe eagerly grabbed at the one she wanted to open, Sam pulled a present out from behind the end of the couch. "And this is for you," she said, handing him the gift.

Surprise filled his eyes, as he looked between the gift and Sam. "For me?" When Sam nodded, his surprise quickly turned to glee and a huge smile filled his face.

Sam smiled happily at the joy that filled John's face over the little gift. She had bought it for the little boy of a friend, but changed the name tag while they were playing. The happy smile that showed in his eyes while he opened it told Sam she had made the right decision.

"Here, Mom. You open one too." Chloe handed her a gift, "Aunt Grace helped me pick it out."

"Thank you, sweetie," she said, kissing Chole on the cheek.

Not opening her gift, Sam watched as both Chloe and John ripped into theirs. "Thanks, Mom!" Chloe said, pulling a huge teddy bear out of the box.

"Well, I thought another to add to your collection couldn't hurt,"

Sam grinned. Turning her attention to John, she asked, "Well? Do you like it?"

Nodding his head, John looked up from the toy firetruck he had opened. "It makes noises and everythin'?"

Sam nodded, still smiling. "And the lights work, too."

Turning the small truck over, he found the switch and flipped it. His face lit up when the truck seemed to spring to life, lights flashing and siren wailing. "Thank you," he said in a small voice after turning off the siren.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you like it."

Standing, he walked over to Sam and gave her a hug. "I'll keep it forever," he whispered in her ear. Suddenly, Sam found herself fighting tears.

John went and sat next to Chloe, who said, "Come on, Mom. You still haven't opened yours."

"Let's see. What could Chloe have got for me this year? Not another cook book I hope."

"Nope," Chloe giggled. "I gave up on that idea."

Sam tried to look hurt, "I'll have you know I'm not that bad of a cook." Chloe merely gave her a look that said . Finally pulling the paper from the box, she opened it to find a gold and ceramic picture frame. Inside it was a picture of mother and daughter. After a moment, she said, "It's beautiful, sweetheart. Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Chloe grinned and walked over to give her mom a hug.

When they broke apart, John looked at Sam. "I didn't get you anything."

Smiling, she motioned for him to come sit beside her. "Yes you did. That smile you had when you opened your present was everything I needed." He smiled shyly, but didn't say anything.

"Now," Sam said, standing up, "I think that it's time for all good boys and girls to go to bed. Santa can't come if you don't go to sleep."

"Aw, Mom," Chloe stalled.

"Sorry, off to bed with you both," Sam laughed.

After walking them upstairs, Sam went into Chole's room and found a pair of old sweats that looked like they would fit their little guest. While Chole was getting ready for bed, Sam ushered John into the guest room. "Here you go, this will be your room for the night."

John looked up at Sam, hesitant as if wanting to ask something. "Will Santa know where to fin' me?" he asked, his voice suddenly sounding very small.

Leading him over to the bed, Sam smiled warmly. "He sure will, I called him while you were playing eariler." She had to fight laughing at the relief that washed over his youthful face. "Want me to help you get changed?" He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head no. "Okay, I'm going to go check on Chloe and then I'll be back, okay?"

"Okay," he answered softly.

After tucking Chloe in, Sam went back to check on John, only to find him fast asleep. For a little while she watched from the doorway, almost wanting to memorize the innocence of his face as he slept. Creeping over, she brushed an errant lock of hair away from his forehead.

Looking at him, lying there peacefully unaware of the outside world, she couldn't help but compare him to John. She knew, that if John were to ever drop his carefully constructed exterior, he would look very much like the little boy before her. Even after telling herself all night that this wasn't him, she couldn't help the familar, yet protective feelings that he caused within her.

On instinct, she kissed her fingertips and brushed them against his forehead. "Sleep well, little John," and she crept from the room.

Early the next morning, Sam was woken up by Chloe long before her alarm clock had the chance to sound. Climbing out of bed, she pulled on a robe and met Chloe in the hall. "Come on, Mom. Present time!" Chloe took hold of Sam's hand and pulled her towards the downstairs.

"You go ahead, Chloe, I'll be there in a minute. I need to check on John." She noticed the funny look Chloe gave her, but after Chloe shook it off and hurried downstairs, she opened the door to the guest room quietly. "John?" she called out softly, not wanting to wake him if he was still asleep.

Shock registered on her face when she saw that not only was he not there, the bed looked like it had never been slept in. Confused, she left the bedroom and walked downstairs to find Chloe waiting on her. "Chlo? What happened to John?"

The funny look reappeared on Chloe's face. "Mom? John's not here. He's coming over later, remember?"

"I know John's not here, but there was a little . . ." She stopped, realizing that Chloe really had no clue what she was talking about. "Never mind," she said, forcing a grin. "Let's see what you managed to rack up this year."

Chloe smiled, and began to dig into her presents. Sam, however, decided she had experienced one heck of a realistic dream the night before.

After lunch, Sam answered a knock at the front door and found John standing there holding a gift. Something must have shown on her face, because John looked at her, asking, "Sam? Everything okay?"

She nodded, and let him in the house, closing the door behind him. "Let me take your coat," she said, and he pulled the bulky parka off, handing it to her.

"Where's Chloe?" he asked, motioning toward the gift, "I brought her one last present."

Smiling, Sam pointed toward the living room. "She knee deep in this year's haul." John nodded, and disappeared into the living room.

Faced with the grown up John, Sam was even more confused by her from the night before. The little boy she had found in the parking lot was so much like John. Only a younger, shyer, less confident version.

She watched him playing with Chloe for a little while before saying, "John? Would you mind helping me with lunch?"

Looking up, he laughed, "I can't cook."

"Don't worry, neither can I," she added, her laughter mixing with his.

Sometime later, Sam was still considering how to bring up the night before. At least, the night before as she remembered it. Finally, she settled for asking about John's best Christmas memories.

"You'll think I'm crazy, Sam."

She smiled, "Why's that?"

He sat down at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee. "Most kids best Christmas memories are with their parents. And my mom and I had some nice Christmas' together after we left my dad. But the one that stands out the best was when I was six or so."

Sam stopped what she was doing and went to sit at the table across from John. "Really? How was it strange?" she asked, trying to cover her avid interest in the subject.

"My old man and I had gone shopping. He yelled at me for something, I don't remember anymore what for. So I ran off, when I tried to find him, he was gone."

"What happened?" Sam marveled at the mature voice relating the same story.

John smiled. "A nice lady found me in the parking lot. She tried to get me home, but when my old man hadn't reported me missing, she let me stay over and play with her daughter." He paused, lost in thought for the moment. Sam, however, was edging closer to shock. "Anyway, I remember her hugging me when I made a mess, I thought she was going to get rid of me for sure then."

"Just for making a mess?" Sam asked, curiosity getting the better of

her.

John nodded, "You didn't know my old man. He would have killed me. Anyway, I played most of the night. Then we watched a movie and she even gave me a Christmas present." A far away look filled the same blue eyes Sam had comforted the night before. "Probably the happiest Christmas I can remember," he added mostly to himself.

"A fire truck," Sam said softly.

"What?"

"The present," Sam reminded him, "it was a fire truck."

"Yeah," John started, but stopped. "How'd? How'd you know that?" surprise filled his voice.

Sam smiled, "A little boy once told me he'd keep it forever. Do you still have it?"

"A little . . . Sam? How'd you know that?"

"Did the lady ever tell you her name?"

John sat there, lost in thought for a moment. "Yeah, but I've never been able to remember it. What was it?" he asked mostly to himself. "Sally? No. Susan? No, but I know it started with a S."

"Samantha?"

Without thinking, John replied, "Yeah, that's it. Samantha. How'd . . ." He stopped speaking, and looked over at Sam. "There's no way you could know that."

Taking a drink of coffee, she said, "Nope. Not that I can think of. Except I do." She hesitated, but continued to speak anyway. "I found a little boy at the mall last night. Only this morning, he was gone and Chloe doesn't seem to remember him."

"You can't seriously think that . . ."

She shook her head, "I don't know what to think. But I would like to know if little Johnny O'Doyle kept his fire truck," she said with a faint smile from behind her coffee mug.

Disbelief still marking his face, John smiled as well. "Yeah, I kept it. It was one of the few things I took with me when we left. It's in a box at my apartment."

Sam smiled over her coffee. "Good."

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